

Six Ways to Help Your Kids Love Reading



Your Free Guide to Creating Happy Readers
With a Bonus Section of Recommended Awesome Books!

By Karen Lock Kolp, M. Ed., of the We Turned Out Okay Podcast

We may not remember, now that we are all grown up, what it was like to learn to read. But as parents, we certainly see the struggles that our children have with it. There's so much about learning to read that is so difficult. Teachers, trying to improve our skills, can criticize us to death; well-meaning adults (or just plain mean kids) can highlight everything we're doing wrong; we can even be taken down by our own self-criticism. What to do? Try these six great ways to help your children strengthen their reading skills, relax about their reading problems – and really love reading, one of the most important of old-school skills.

1) Let kids choose for themselves what to read

"Mom, am I a *reader*?" – My son Jason, brandishing a beloved Garfield comic book

"You sure are buddy!" – Me, with a huge smile on my face

What floats your child's boat? Is it almanacs? Ranger Rick? Calvin and Hobbes? Picture books? As parents, our job is to think outside the reading box – there is more to life than chapter books. If we censor by genre, if we say for example "comics aren't real reading – put that down and go find a *real* book," we might be taking away the one motivation our child even has for reading.

Just after he started being able to decode print, my Jason loved the Mo Willems picture books about Elephant and Piggy; while I worried that they were too simplistic, much more appropriate for younger readers, I bit back my concerns. Am I glad I did! Over the years since, Jason reads everything he can get his hands on, from Harry Potter to adult how-to books (current favorite: *Wiring Simplified*, about how to wire a house for electricity).

If your child has a hard time in a library because of the sheer amount of choices, try

this tactic: select a few books, maybe 5 to 10, some picture books, some graphic novels, some chapter books – and do this great thing called strewing. Get the books out and bring them home, and just leave them on a table, or next to a couch or chair or big comfy cushion, and see which ones your child is drawn to. We've discovered some of our favorite book series this way (see the bonus resources section at the end for a guide to our favorite books by age of child).

Giving kids the choice of what to read for themselves really works because everyone likes to have some control in their lives. If you think about how many times you need to tell your child "no" in the course of a day, I bet it's a lot of times! Help further their reading by saying "yes" today, to any age appropriate chapter book, picture book, or graphic novel that *they* choose.

2) Let them share about their reading – or not – as they choose

We have to trust that our kids are doing what is expected of them. Might as well start early, and with something truly basic like whether they got their reading done or not. Put another way, if you are trying to catch your kid out for not reading, she is going to understand that implicitly, be resentful, and clam up. You will close off communication! Not what you want on any level.

Here is the go-around that still works in our home: instead of saying "tell me three things about that chapter" (because that will show me that you have read what you were supposed to read), I will ask something like "did you crack up as much as I did when Fudge ate the turtle?" Or, "I think Skink is my favorite character... who's yours?" Or "can you believe that [evil villain] C.C. Coalback was living in the attic of the police station all along?"

This works because now, you and your child are aligned together, you're just two people talking books. It's a whole different dynamic from Knowledgeable Adult Quizzing Reluctant Child, which who really needs that anyway? Your child will thrive as a reader because you're treating him as an equal, giving the choice of sharing in such an irresistible way that he is completely drawn in.

And, we do have to make it a true choice. If they don't want to share, that has to be okay; just imagine if your boss put you on the spot at work about something that you really wanted more time to think about before giving an answer.

When we give our kids true decision-making power, that comes back to us not only with their respect, but with our children's trust. Which will have your daughter running to you with an open book so she can show you her favorite part, your son reading passages aloud for your enjoyment.

And speaking of reading aloud...

3) Let them make mistakes as they read out loud... Don't interrupt to correct their reading

"Perfectionism is destructive... Beating the sh*t out of yourself is a killer."
– Henry Winkler, a.k.a. the Fonz, Arthur Fonzarelli

It is so tempting. But it is a major no-no; when we correct mid-read, we give them the message that they're doing something wrong. Which, yes! Of course they are doing something wrong, but think of all the things that they are doing right – pausing for a period or comma, getting other words right, using pictures as cues, most importantly making meaning from the text themselves. Interrupting to correct them only disrupts all the things they are doing right.

But that does not mean that you just abandon them to the four winds, throw up your hands and say "oh well, I give up."

This is where we parents have to get creative:

- Was it a tough word that they read incorrectly? At an appropriate pause, that is when we jump in with "I never knew there was a county in Maine called Aroostook, did you?" Something where we say the word correctly, without pointing out that our son or daughter has just said it wrong (whatever *it* is).
- We need to use the same tactic if it seems clear that some important meaning has been missed. At a pause, when she's turning the page or he's between sentences, we say "I wonder why [whatever you think your child missed] happened?" Always working towards bringing attention to what you want your child to understand, without hitting him or her over the head with "hey, dummy – you MISSED this."
- Finally, we need to know when not to nitpick. Did your daughter read right through a comma? Did your son really garble the name of that state capitol, but otherwise thoroughly understand what was happening in the sentence? Sometimes, that is just fine because either your reader understood the text despite mistakes, or he or she will get the mistaken word next time around.

4) Better yet, you do the reading aloud

Reading aloud is one of the greatest treasures we can give our children. Not only does it enhance their reading skills and support cognitive development and language acquisition, according to Betty Lynn Segal Bardige, author of *Talk To Me, Baby!*, reading aloud creates great memories – and not just for the kids!

We can read aloud to them from when they are babies, still chewing on chubby board books, all the way up into the tween years. One of my favorite memories is of reading *The Hobbit* to my boys when they were 12 and eight, and hanging on every word I uttered, one of them on each side of me, snuggled up on the couch. And, let me just say that 12-year-olds are not known for snuggling up – it was a great experience for that, and so much more.

One sneaky way that I have sparked an interest in chapter books is to start reading one out loud; often, I don't finish reading them aloud because the boys couldn't wait for tomorrow, and finished the books on their own tonight!

Being read to fosters a love of reading, so get into the practice early and expect to enjoy reading aloud with your children for many years to come.

5) Find a pet they can read to

At age 8, my Jason was not a struggling reader. He was a very accomplished reader, reading well above grade level, reading aloud, reading complex texts. Yet he still benefited greatly when our library instituted a program of inviting children to spend half an hour reading to Indiana Bones, "Indy" to his friends, a wonderful and gentle therapy dog.

Dogs – who are completely nonjudgmental and have such a reassuring presence – make perfect "listeners." They don't care if you read them the same picture book 25 times, they don't care how many mistakes you make (and neither does a therapy dog's human companion, who remains in the room with reader and dog, fading completely into the background). Jason, ordinarily a running, jumping whirling dervish, chose books that he thought Indy would love, mainly books about Wishbone the dog or something from the *Bunnicula* series – books narrated by a pooch named Harold who tells the hilarious story of learning to live with a vampire bunny – and then spent half an hour reading quietly to Indy... after which he would pat Indy on the head and leave the library, contented, mellow, and quietly happy.

Those sessions with Indy helped solidify Jay's love of reading; imagine what it could do for a struggling reader! Investigate whether your public library has a therapy dog reading program; it could be the best step you take regarding your child's love of reading.

6) Recognize different learning styles

Thanks to my friend Carol Rogers for reminding me about this one!

Probably from the day your second child was born, you noticed differences in temperament and preference among your children. Well, that holds true for learning to

read; one prefers almanacs and nonfictional how-to, another prefers hilarious picture books, a third riveting sci-fi.

Just as preferences differ, so do learning styles. No two children approach the fairly monumental – if you step back and really consider the size of the task – job of learning to read. Some breeze right into it, learning almost by osmosis; one moment they're not reading print, it seems, and then the very next moment they are. For some, it takes longer to work out this transition. Some are helped by the rules and structure of language, some need to see words in context, with picture cues.

But something holds true for everyone: we learn best when we enjoy what we're learning. **We learn best when the pressure is off.** This is especially true of children, who have such high aspirations but also such a long way to go to get there (whether "there" is reading, learning a sport, or just about anything you can think of). Most importantly, we learn to read best when we see the people around us reading. Humans are social creatures!

While everyone learns differently, we all want to come out in the same place, with the ability to share our thoughts, questions, laughter, and love. When you make it clear that your child's choices about what to read really matter, when you read to your child, and when you take the pressure off, you are creating a *reader*. It's a very powerful thing!

Thank you for reading this guide!

I really hope these ideas and resources help you create happy readers. But... I'll never know if you don't tell me!

Please go to weturnedoutokay.com/contact, or just karen@weturnedoutokay.com, and share:

What was most helpful to you?

What other ways do you help your kids love reading?

What are your kids' favorite books, the ones that they cannot help but be drawn into?

I just might read your suggestion or book review on the air, or shout about it in a blog post, because it's not just about me telling you great stuff – it's about us learning from each other.

I can't wait to hear your thoughts and ideas!

Happy reading,

Karen

Psst... There's a bonus section after this :)

Bonus: 8 Great Books to Help Your Child Love Reading

Good Dog, Carl – by Alexandra Day

Best for: birth to 3

A fun story told almost completely in pictures about the day Mom and Dad leave Carl in charge of the baby. I have not seen this book in more than a decade, and I still remember so many pages vividly because of the great pictures!

10 Minutes Till Bedtime – by Peggy Rathmann

Best for: ages 2 to 5

When a boy's hamster goes on the Internet to invite other hamsters to "come and take the bedtime tour," you know you are in for a good time. This beautifully illustrated book is one of those where, the more you look at the pictures, the more you see – my youngest's favorite book from the moment it was first placed in his hands when he turned two.

Don't Let The Pigeon Drive The Bus! – By Mo Willems

Best for: ages birth to 6, although my 10-year-old still reads this book

All the pigeon books are fantastic, like The Pigeon Finds A Hot Dog, Don't Let the Pigeon Finish This Activity Book!... In fact, we've never met a Mo Willems book we did not like! Books about Trixie and her stuffed animal, Knuffle Bunny, The Elephant and Piggy series... You should read them all.

The Sneeches – by Dr. Seuss

Best for: ages 5 and up

Told completely in rhyme, this hilarious book about the day Sylvester McMonkey McBean comes to the Sneeches on the beaches will be one that you and your family return to for years.

The Frog and Toad Series by Arnold Lobel

Best for: ages 5 and up

Frog and Toad are two dear friends, and you learn a surprising amount about them in these very short stories. Their exciting adventures include waiting for the mail (delivered via snail), learning about willpower by resisting the allure of freshly-baked cookies, raking each other's leaves in the fall, and waiting for plants to start growing spring.

Bunnicula – by James Howe

Best for: ages 6 and up

Bunnicula, and the other books in this series, are some of the best read-aloud books in the universe. Your child will be able to listen to you as you read aloud from chapter books far earlier than he or she could read them alone, and the age I list here is for you reading aloud. Expect a child to read Bunnicula alone at perhaps ages eight or nine; if they're returning to this series after listening to you read them earlier, they will enjoy them that much more.

Tall Tales – a graphic novel by Jeff Smith

Best for: ages 8 and up

Gateway into the Bone series, one of the best graphic novel series ever written. You may start reading this with your children, but you will find yourself unable to stop reading them; the stories about the Bone cousins, their adversaries the Stupid Stupid Rat Creatures, and all the friends they meet once they leave Boneville are completely addicting. (Kids under eight may be frightened of the Rat Creatures, which can sometimes seem pretty scary... But if your kids are fine with that, I say go with it!)

Games For Reading – by Peggy Kaye

This book will help you understand learning to read from your child's perspective; sometimes as adults, we've been doing it for so long that we forget how truly awesome a power reading is – and how difficult it can be to learn. These games strengthen your child's reading skills while giving you many opportunities to have fun together.